

# Elder Abuse: Ethnocultural Issues and Perspectives

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# Aging Population

- Seniors make up the fastest-growing age group.
- This trend is expected to continue for the next several decades due mainly to a decreased fertility rate, an increase in life expectancy, and the effects of the baby boom.
- In 2003, an estimated 4.6 million Canadians were 65 years of age or older which is expected to double in the next 25 years.
- By 2041 one in four Canadians is expected to be 65 or over (Statistics Canada, 2010).

# Increasing Ethnocultural Diversity

- Canada's ethnic and cultural makeup is undergoing rapid change. By 2017, about one Canadian in five could be a member of a visible minority group.
- The South Asian population is the largest visible minority group in 2006, comprising 24.9% of the visible minority population or 4.0% of the total population.
- The Chinese populations account for 24.0% of the visible minority population or 3.9% of the total population.
- Black Canadians comprise 5.5% of the visible minority population or 2.5% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2008).

# Immigrant Seniors

- In 2001, some 29% of individuals aged 65 to 74 and 28% of those aged 75 to 84 were immigrants in comparison, to the 17% of the non-senior population.
- Many immigrant seniors, especially more recent immigrants, have different characteristics and experiences than those born in Canada: different labour market experiences when they were younger (later entry, dissimilar occupations), needed to learn a new language as adults, tended to live in more urban areas all their lives, have had less time to save for retirement and fewer are likely to be eligible for Canadian public pension plans (Statistics Canada, 2002).

# Definition of Elder Abuse

- The World Health Organization (2002) adheres to the definition of elder abuse developed by the United Kingdom's *Action on Elder Abuse* as, "...a single, or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person" (p. 3).

# Definition of Elder Abuse

- Five primary categories of elder abuse are typically recognized: physical abuse; psychological or emotional abuse; financial or material abuse; sexual abuse; and neglect.
- Older adults identify abuse under three broad themes:
  - neglect (which includes isolation, abandonment and social exclusion);
  - violation (human, legal and medical rights); and
  - deprivation (of choices, decisions, status, finances and respect) (World Health Organization, 2002).

# Cultural Definitions of Elder Abuse

- Tam and Neysmith (2006) caution researchers in the field of elder abuse “about applying elder abuse categories derived from a Western cultural perspective to understand or account for abuse in other cultures” (p. 149).

# Acculturation vs. Culture

- Acculturation rather than ethnicity may be more important when defining elder abuse.
- “Factors such as place of birth, age at immigration to America, length of residence in the United States, proficiency in English, familiarity with American laws and protective services, income level, educational level, and living arrangement may be more influential than ethnicity in defining elder abuse. Overemphasizing cultural differences without regard to other factors may be more detrimental than helpful if non-cultural issues related to elder abuse are ignored when addressing elder abuse situations among ethnic minorities” (Wyandt, 2004, p. 43).

# Why Culture Matters

- Older immigrants may not recognize themselves as victims of abuse (Shim & Nelson-Becker, 2009).
- They often do not know their legal or human rights or the community resources that are available to them (Podnieks, 2008).
- Language barriers, social isolation, financial and emotional dependency, sociocultural factors, dysfunctional family dynamics, caregiver stress and personal characteristics of the victim and the perpetrator may lead to elder abuse or prolong it in some ethnocultural communities (Podnieks, 2008).

# Why Culture Matters

- Minority elders tend to be “poorer, less educated, unemployed, and more prone to illness than nonminority elders” (San Filippo et al., 2007, p. 218).
- Under-reporting of elder abuse has been related to discomfort in discussing the issue (Lai, in press) and a strong sense of family honour (Walsh & Hassanali, in press); a strong reliance on family members for support (Parra-Cardona et al., 2007) and perceptions about treatment within the criminal justice system (Simpson, 2005).
- In some cultures, silence, shame and secrecy about abuse is common (Tsukada et al., 2001; Walsh & Hassanali, in press).

# South Asian

- Despite the significant presence of South Asian older adults in Canada, data concerning the occurrence and experiences of elder abuse in this population remains largely absent.
- The South Asian population is “one of the most unified when it comes to the value they attach to family interaction, the maintenance of social networks within their cultural group, and the preservation of ethnic customs, traditions and heritage languages” (Tran, Kaddatz , & Allard, 2005: p 20).
- Most research about South Asians comes from the US or the UK with most studies grouping South Asians with other Asian ethnic and cultural groups as one “culturally undifferentiated” group (Simpson, 2005).

# South Asian

- Suggested factors that contribute to abuse of older South Asians in Canada include the financial dependency on their sponsors, social isolation due to language barriers (Walsh et al., 2007) and caregiver burden (Chokkanathan & Lee, 2005; Gupta & Pillai, 2000).
- Information on the extent and nature of elder abuse within this population however is scarce due to cultural sanctions against disclosure (Murzban Dinshaw, 2004).
- Personal shame, family honour and protecting family members were main reasons articulated for not reporting such experiences (Gupta, 2005).

# South Asians

- Service providers (n= 11)
- Older men (n= 10, 12)
- Older women (n= 7, 6)

# South Asians

- Discomfort with the issue of sexual abuse
- “In our culture, we do not even discuss sexual things as that is a very private matter”
- “...sexual abuse questions can be very embarrassing for the women”
- “ these questions are applicable to women only.”
- “If someone asks me, I won’t feel comfortable talking about sexual issues.”

# East Asian

- Filial piety (showing respect, fulfilling responsibility, harmonizing the family, making payments, showing affection, and making sacrifices )(Lai, in press; Sung, 2001) is thought to be a protective factor for abuse.
- Forces of industrialization, urbanization, and acculturation in Western societies have challenged traditional values, family structure and decreased filial piety in Asian societies (Cheng & Chan, 2006; Dong et al., 2007).
- Elder abuse is on the rise within these societies. The majority of the abuse is verbal and violation of personal rights (Yan & Tang, 2001/2004).

# East Asian

- Service Providers (n = 12)
- Cantonese (Male n = 6; Female n = 7)
- Mandarin (Male n = 2; Female n = 8)

# East Asian

- A very common phenomenon in the Chinese community is that most abusers are unaware of their behaviours/actions which may result in harm or distress to their spouses/parents.
- “At home the husband quite often ridicules or rebukes his wife, the wife is resigned to accept it or feels ashamed to tell others.”
- “The son gets control of his parents’ bank account and he thinks it is his right to get money from his parents.”

# Black

- Older African Americans tend to be more prone to financial abuse and intentional neglect than other forms of violence (Dimah & Dimah, 2002; Paranjape et al., 2009).
- Cultural sanctions to physical abuse of older African American women who are viewed as matriarchs of the family.
- Family members tend to move in with older African women, making them more vulnerable to financial and/or emotional abuse (Paranjape et al., 2009).
- Verbal abuse is viewed as particularly harmful by older African American women (Tauriac & Scruggs, 2006).

# Black

- Service providers (n = 8)
- Caribbean (n = 9)
- Nigerian (n = 6)

# Black

- Problems with the term elder abuse
- “‘Elder abuse’ is a euro-centric term.”
- “Respecting elders is important in community. The term ‘elder abuse’ is not an appropriate term. Disrespect is understood more fully. Once disrespect is seen, then the kind of disrespect becomes important.”

# Conclusion

- The increasing aging of the Canadian populations calls attention to issues such as the victimization of older adults.
- The lack of a standard definition of elder abuse which incorporates perspectives of diverse ethnocultural populations hampers the development of the field such that it is difficult to compare research findings (Anetzberger, 2005; Nerenberg, 2000), create a research framework for the issue (Lowenstein, 2009), expand the knowledge base (Podnieks, 2008), prevent or detect abuse (Yaffe et al., 2008).
- Further research on the understanding and experience of elder abuse within ethnocultural populations is necessary.

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